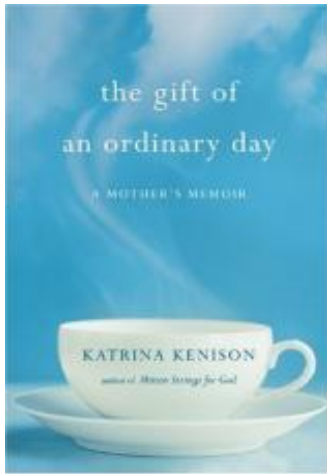


# The Gift of an Ordinary Day: A Mother's Memoir

by Katrina Kenison

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## About the Book

**The Gift of an Ordinary Day** is an intimate memoir of a family in transition --- boys becoming teenagers, careers ending and new ones opening up, an attempt to find a deeper sense of place, and a slower pace, in a small New England town. It is a story of mid-life longings and discoveries, of lessons learned in the search for home and a new sense of purpose, and the bittersweet intensity of life with teenagers --- holding on, letting go.

Poised on the threshold between family life as she's always known it and her older son's departure for college, Kenison is surprised to find that the times she treasures most are the ordinary, unremarkable moments of everyday life, the very moments that she once took for granted, or rushed right through without noticing at all.

The relationships, hopes, and dreams that Kenison illuminates will touch women's hearts, and her words will inspire mothers everywhere as they try to make peace with the inevitable changes in store.

## Discussion Guide

1. Trying to describe the restlessness she felt as her sons approached adolescence, Katrina admits:

"I longed for something I could scarcely name but that our orderly, well-defined life seemed no longer to provide. Watching my sons growing and changing so visibly, almost from one day to the next, I sensed something inside me breaking loose and changing as well, something no less powerful for being invisible . . . I was suddenly haunted by all the things I hadn't done, the dreams that might never be realized, the sense that the tidy, civilized life we'd worked so hard to create didn't quite fit the person I really was, or, rather, still thought I might be."

Have you experienced a similar unrest in your own life as your children began to claim their independence? What longings did you experience? What kind of movement resulted from these unsettled feelings?

2. "If you want to grow," wrote Gail Sheehy in her self-help classic *Passages*, "you must be willing to change." Change is a theme that runs throughout this memoir, changes both sought and unsought. As Katrina comes to realize, "our lives are always in the process of becoming something else." What changes have you resisted in your life? What changes have you wished for, and then regretted? What unsought changes have turned out to be blessings in disguise?

3. When Katrina's older son scores poorly on a standardized test, she knows that the numbers do not really reflect his intelligence or his character. And yet, so often our children's potential is judged by how well they perform on tests, in schoolrooms, and on athletic fields. How do you measure success in your family? Do you believe that attitude is as important as aptitude? Given the competitive culture in which our children are coming of age, how can we help them grow up knowing that who they are is even more important than what they do?

4. Katrina falls in love with the dilapidated red cottage at first sight; her husband thinks she's lost her mind. In the end, she prevails, but then doubts all of the impulses that drove her to want it in the first place. How do you make big decisions in your life? Do you trust your intuition, or do you listen to an inner voice that is more practical and well reasoned? How do you deal with the negative, as well as positive, results of those decisions?

5. The solstice party is an act of desperation, an attempt to cheer a demoralized family at the end of a long, hard week. And although only three people show up, it works. What do you think makes for a good party? How do you create magic in less-than-ideal circumstances?

6. While stripping the paint off a collection of two-hundred-year old doors, Katrina allows herself to peel away some of the protective layers of her own persona as well. In solitude and silence, she initiates a long-postponed conversation with herself. In the process, she begins to practice a more mindful cultivation of gratitude. What layers might you be willing to strip away in order to look more deeply at who you are in this moment? What would it mean to become a better friend to your authentic self? How can you make time do this if you feel overcommitted?

7. As we begin to honor our everyday experience, to value the ordinary, we become more open to the extraordinary. What ordinary moments did you notice and appreciate today?

8. Marion Woodman has written: "A mother who is identified with being mother has to have children who will eat what she gives them to eat and do what she wants them to do. They must remain children."

A central theme in **The Gift of an Ordinary Day** is the challenge all mothers face, of learning to let go, so that our children can grow up to be the adults they are meant to be. Where are you in this process? How difficult is it to step back and trust that your children will find their way? What part of letting go has been the hardest for you?

9. You could say that the author's search for a home is central to the book's story, but perhaps it would be more accurate to say that her real quest is to arrive at a new understanding of what home truly means, once home is no longer a place where children are growing up. How do you define home? How has your vision of home changed as your children have grown up and away? How much of your idea of home is attached to a physical place? How much of it is a state of mind?

**10.** Katrina comes to see that the years of moving and transition have enabled her to avoid some of the hard questions she needed to ask herself as her children moved through adolescence, questions such as "Who am I now?" and "What am I called to do?" Have you had to answer those questions in your own life? What finally prompted you to ask them?

**11.** Perhaps it is human nature, but most of us fail to appreciate our ordinary days until something happens that robs us of the very life we so easily took for granted. Have you had such a wake-up call in your life? What was it, and how did it change the way you view an ordinary day?

**12.** In an early morning conversation, Jack muses about how much he's come to care about people he never would have expected to be his friends. Debbie and eQuanimity Joy appear as characters in Katrina's new life, but become unexpected friends. How do you make new friends as an adult? Have you welcomed people into your life whom you might not have embraced when you were younger? What unlikely soul mates have aided you on your journey?

**13.** Throughout her book, Katrina draws on the wisdom of many other writers whose words have inspired and supported her. Which quotes resonated with you? Whose insights help you to live the life you aspire to?

**14.** Hard as it was to leave a home and a life her family loved, Katrina eventually comes to see that for everything they lost, they have gained something as well. What have you been asked to release in your life, and what gifts have been placed into your open hand in return?

## Author Bio

Katrina Kenison is the author of *THE GIFT OF AN ORDINARY DAY* and *MITTEN STRINGS FOR GOD: REFLECTIONS FOR MOTHERS IN A HURRY*. She has appeared on *Oprah*, as well as other shows. Her writing has appeared in *O*, *Real Simple*, *Family Circle*, *Redbook*, *Better Homes and Gardens*, *Health*, and other publications. From 1990 until 2006, Kenison was the series editor of *The Best American Short Stories*, published annually by Houghton Mifflin. She co-edited, with John Updike, *THE BEST AMERICAN SHORT STORIES OF THE CENTURY* (Houghton Mifflin, 2000). She wrote, with Rolf Gates, *MEDITATIONS FROM THE MAT: DAILY REFLECTIONS ON THE PATH OF YOGA* (Random House, 2002).

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